

level.<sup>[21]</sup> Regardless of whether or not Candrakīrti was conscious of the logical distinction between the domains of the two perspectives, it is clear that the way in which Tsongkhapa understood this distinction and used it as a fundamental methodological principle is unique. In Tsongkhapa's view the considerations concerning the different scopes of the two types of analysis are, in general terms, common to both the Svātantrika school of Madhyamaka and Candrakīrti's Prāsaṅgika school as well. Tsongkhapa maintains that both Madhyamaka sub-schools share the same basic premise that the conventional world cannot be subjected to ultimate analysis. Where the two sub-schools differ is on the question of what exactly constitutes this ultimate analysis.<sup>[22]</sup> In other words, Tsongkhapa is asserting that anyone who claims to follow the lineage of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka must necessarily accept some form of analytic distinction between the two domains of discourse, which roughly correspond to the two levels of reality – namely, the ultimate (*paramārtha*) and the conventional (*saṃvṛti*).

### Two senses of 'ultimate' in the Madhyamaka dialectic

Within the context of the way in which Mādhyamikas express the notion that things and events are devoid of existence and identity on an ultimate level – that is, their assertion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as the ultimate nature of things – there are, according to Tsongkhapa, two subtly different ways in which the term 'ultimate' (*paramārtha*) is used. These two connotations of 'ultimate' are, additionally, closely related to the distinction between two forms of discourse, ultimate and conventional. First and foremost, in the context of Madhyamaka ontology (or its negation), the term 'ultimate' is used in the sense that all things and events are devoid of any absolute, or ultimate, existence or identity.<sup>[23]</sup> Here, 'ultimate' (*paramārtha*) is synonymous with 'substantially real mode of being' as in the phrase 'existent with a substantially real mode of being' (*bden par grub pa*), and with 'thorough' or 'perfect' as in 'existing with a thoroughly or perfectly definable nature' (*yang dag par grub pa*). In its second usage, 'ultimate' is juxtaposed with 'relative' (*saṃvṛti*) in the pan-Mahāyāna doctrine of the two truths. In this latter context, 'ultimate' refers to the ultimate nature of all things and events as opposed to their relative (that is, empirical and conventional) nature. Although these two senses of

ultimate (*paramārtha*) overlap, each has a distinct meaning. Nothing can be said to be real in the first sense – ultimately, or absolutely, real – because all phenomena – i.e., things, events, even the emptiness of intrinsic existence itself – are devoid of ultimate existence and identity. However, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) can be said to be ‘real’ in the second sense of ultimate and can, therefore, be said to be ‘true’ (*bden pa*), as it is the final nature of all things and events, the way things really are. This is because only emptiness (*śūnyatā*) can be found to remain at the end of an analysis pertaining to the ultimate status of things and events. This does not mean that emptiness itself can withstand ultimate analysis in Tsongkhapa’s view, for nothing can withstand such probing. When subjected to such deconstructive analysis, emptiness too is found to be empty. Hence, the emptiness of emptiness.<sup>[24]</sup>

This distinction between two connotations of the term ‘ultimate’ allows Tsongkhapa to make seemingly paradoxical statements like ‘emptiness is the ultimate reality but it is not ultimately real,’ ‘it is true but not truly established,’ ‘it is the intrinsic nature [of all things] but does not exist intrinsically’ and so on. For example, in GR, Tsongkhapa writes:

If this [distinction between the two senses of the term ‘ultimate’] is ascertained well, one will understand the meanings that explain why there is no contradiction between [maintaining] that nothing exists by means of its own nature and that nothing exists from the ultimate perspective, while holding that ‘ultimate nature’ exists and that it is the ‘mode of being [of things]’ and the ultimate object.<sup>[25]</sup>

Although it is quite customary for modern scholars on Mahāyāna Buddhism to translate the Sanskrit word *paramārtha* as ‘absolute’ within the context of the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths, my view is that this translation should not be accepted as unproblematic. Following Tsongkhapa, there seem to be adequate grounds to make a case for distinguishing between *paramārtha* as ‘absolute’ and *paramārtha* as ‘ultimate.’ The interpretation of *paramārtha* as ‘absolute’ is totally rejected in the Madhyamaka dialectic, even in relation to emptiness. However, the interpretation of *paramārtha* as ‘ultimate’ is acceptable as that which is in contraposition to the relative, veiled truth (*samvṛti*) constituted by our everyday world of causes and effects. Tsongkhapa writes:

Therefore, it cannot be the case that the ultimate meaning, the nature of things, their suchness and mode of being [of all phenomena] do not exist. Even if they exist, they do not do so as absolutes or as [their own] real mode of being. To suggest otherwise is to demonstrate a total lack of familiarity with the modes of critical analysis from the ultimate standpoint.<sup>[26]</sup>

Tsongkhapa concludes the above discussion by stating that it is because they do not appreciate this subtle distinction, namely, the difference between the ultimate and the absolute, that some (e.g., Ngok Loden Sherap) have maintained that ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) is unknowable, while others (such as the Jonangpas) have asserted that it is absolute.<sup>[27]</sup> In brief, Tsongkhapa is saying that nothing, not even emptiness, can be said to exist from an absolute standpoint, while at the same time something, i.e., emptiness, can be said to be the ultimate nature. In other words, nothing exists ‘ultimately’ (*don dam par*) although something can be said to be ‘the ultimate’ (*don dam pa*). It is interesting to note here that so much philosophical significance hangs on what seems to be a peculiar linguistic or grammatical form. Tsongkhapa implies that any particular usage of the term ‘ultimate’ (*paramārtha*) in this peculiar grammatical case entails ontological claims. The grammatical case in point is what is known in Tibetan as *de nyid*, a unique case of prepositional usage that is employed almost exclusively in reference to the notion of identity. This usage could be perhaps best compared to the adverbial case in English. Phrases such as *don dam par grub* (ultimately existing), *yang dag par grub* (existing by means of thoroughly definable nature), *bden par yod* (truly existing), *gshis lugs su grub* (established by means of its own mode of being), *rang dbang du grub* (independently existing), *rdzas su yod* (substantially existing), and *tshugs thub tu yod* (existing by means of autonomous being) are cases of this usage.<sup>[28]</sup> Again, Tsongkhapa’s way of defining the meaning of ‘ultimate’ (*paramārtha*) in the context of Madhyamaka dialectics, based on distinguishing between the two different senses of the term, seems to have contributed towards greater clarity in Madhyamaka reasoning. It enables us to have a clearer appreciation of what exactly is being negated in the Madhyamaka assertion that things and events do not exist from the ‘ultimate’ standpoint. This, then, takes us to the next element.